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# Dramatisation of the Narrator's Psychology in *The Good Soldier*

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## Introduction

As Paul B. Armstrong argues, the act of literary representation itself has become problematic in modernist texts. Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915) undoubtedly shows such awareness, making the most of a deviate way of narrative. In this paper we are to examine how the narrator disposes the events, not just what those events are, embodies a kind of psychological drama enacted in him.

*The Good Soldier* contains different levels of reality layered through storytelling. It is Dowell, the narrator, who conveys the final version of story to us; however, it still has diverse aspects, towards which the reader is unable to take a definite attitude: on the one hand, it is possible for us to follow Dowell's request for our being "a sympathetic soul" (19) listening to his story in some country house, assuming ourselves to sit before him; on the other hand, we can more realistically imagine Dowell alone at the desk writing away his confession to an imaginary reader or listener. Situating Dowell in such ambiguity, Ford makes us conscious of the physical act of presenting a story — that is, narrating is an act performed by a living body, if only within the world of the novel.

As Samuel Hynes points out, unlike Fielding's authoritative narrator, Dowell oscillates between several possibilities of truth (Hynes, 97), which is likely to result from that physicality. Take for example how the Ashburnhams are described in the early part. As Dowell looks back at the past, his description of them incessantly changes: it quite easily shifts from a "model couple" to a couple of adulterers without passion (Jacobs, 33). As well as the affairs of love and death he tells about, his psychological transformation in between is observable here.

In considering the novel this way, we should not identify the narrator with the author. Whereas Dowell inside the text's universe appears to narrate the episodes in the order of their occurring to him (as he declares himself), Ford stands behind and, according to Patrick O'Neill figurative expression, manipulates him like an adroit ventriloquist. Although Dowell's storytelling may seem "rambling," "*The Good Soldier* is anything but rambling; it has its own inner logic and order of time" (Hoffman, 77). By listening to Dowell's meandering narration, we will perceive Ford's dexterous handling of it to create artistic effects.

In this essay, we shall examine some examples showing the interaction of the narrative and the things narrated — especially about Nancy Rufford — which will show us what Ford accomplishes by devising the unique way of narrative.

## I

In this chapter we will briefly examine important characteristics of Dowell's narrative. By considering why Dowell writes, in the first

place, we could clarify how that peculiar way is adopted. He says that the reasons are "quite many" but particularly mentions human beings' "desire to set down what they have witnessed" or "just to get the sight out of their heads" (13). Among his many interlinked motives, an incident particularly seems to urge him to write — namely, Leonora's revelation one week after Edward's funeral: she tells Dowell that his wife, Florence, has long been Edward's mistress, and that her death was in fact suicide. Having almost ridiculously been blind to the facts, Dowell first becomes aware of the world's complicated depths beneath the deceptive surface. The impact leads him to write his experiences out, articulate them in language.

Thus starts Dowell's seeking of truth, and its process itself constitutes one dramatic aspect of the novel. Frank MacShane says its "horrible" point is "the gradual revelation of the uncontrollable passion that exists in people who ordinarily follow the generally rational conventions of society" (MacShane, 112). Acquiring a new light in which to see things, Dowell begins to make uncanny things smouldering in his mind visible and examinable by writing. He tries to distance himself from and look objectively at them, so that they will get "out of his head."

In these terms, it is quite understandable that Dowell adopts his peculiar style — he believes that his version of the "real" world cannot be told about in a different way. He says of his manner of narrative: "real stories are probably told best in the way a person telling a story would tell them" (167). Dowell's seemingly arbitrary style is at the same time suitable for the purpose of exploring the world without presupposing what it is like. He refuses any apparently definite truth — the recurrent phrase, "I don't know," expresses Dowell's un-

certainty about truth. The human soul is, for example, among the most perplexing to him. He gives a look at people around and finds their hearts impenetrable. Those who are unfathomable range from ordinary people whose minds are only seemingly commonplace, such as the lady who has sold him "so expensive violets" but in fact might have been cheating him, the porter carrying their luggage who might be a thief (39), and Florence's trusted maid who unexpectedly stole a ring (144), to the classy people around Dowell, "those three hardened gamblers, who were all in league to conceal their hands" (68) from him.

His uncertainty about the world prevents him from setting himself in the position of privileged, omniscient narrator. He instead chooses to settle down in the mysterious world consisting of an accumulation of fleeting impressions looked at from inside. Frank Kermode briefly sums up this process: "In trying to find out he is as it were reading the story, as you are" (Kermode, 98); and vice versa—in reading the story we are experiencing the events that he did. Paul L. Wiley says of the effect of this method on us: "His hesitations and shocks...ensure the involvement of the reader in an experience which is always in process because constantly rendered and which results in the sense of behind-scene disclosure" (Wiley, 188).

Dowell's peculiar style of narrative is thus a reflection of his attitude toward the world, which at the same time helps Ford get rid of unnaturalness about the narrative and provides us with the feeling of necessity about the way it goes. As we are going to consider in the following chapter, it thus enables us to observe a touching change of his emotion, which is not static but dynamic in direct relation with the actual world around him.

## II

As we have seen, it is by telling a story that Dowell struggles to give articulate meanings to the experiences he and the other characters have undergone. In so doing, he imagines that he is telling to a silent listener what he is in fact writing alone. This probably means his resolution to narrate without planning the architecture in advance, strictly following the course of events along which his arbitrary memory leads him, if it becomes "a very rambling way so that it may be difficult for anyone to find their path through what may be a sort of maze" (167). We should keep in mind his writing's linear and one-way nature arising from his likening it to private talking, whose adoption he loudly declares, because it has much to do with the achievement of the artistic effects we are to examine.

There are examples showing this characteristic in the early part of the novel. First, having proclaimed the beautifully autonomous relationship between the Ashburnhams and the Dowells to be "like a minuet," he abruptly turns over what he has just said: "No, by God, it is false! It wasn't a minuet that we stepped; it was a prison" (14). Secondly, Dowell whimsically breaks off a sentence and resumes it two pages later, saying: "it occurs to me that some way back I began a sentence that I have never finished" (28). He does not revise the incomplete sentence, but adds a new one a few pages later to complement it. Lastly, he does not hesitate to explicitly correct a falsehood he has told. For example, the earlier Dowell says: "I don't believe that for one minute she [Florence] was out of my sight (15)"; but, as his writing advances, his insight into the realities are improved

and he acquires a new view on the matter. He then refutes his own former opinion: "But, looking over what I have written, I see that I have unintentionally misled you when I said that Florence was never out of my sight. Yet that was the impression that I really had until just now" (84).

Obviously, Ford deliberately provides these narrative characteristics so that the reader will be conscious of Dowell's method of writing. One effect is, as we have already seen, to emphasise his attitude, his fear for hurrying to establish a deceptively definitive truth. He refuses to regard one version of truth as more valuable than another, instead choosing to juxtapose them as they are in indecisive suspension.

We should pay attention to another important effect; that is, Ford utilises the rambling-ness of Dowell's narrative to present his psychological state, his heart's momentary heaves, by forbidding his revising the text retrospectively. His sentiments are only accumulated, not arranged in order, so that they trace the dramatic movement of his emotion.

As this narrator does not transcend time and space, he still takes part in the activities around. In these terms, the narrative's most significant change appears when Dowell deals with Nancy Rufford's madness that is still an existing problem. In contrast to Leonora who ultimately fails to see the world's mysteries in depth, Dowell here emerges as a person who sensitively and passionately responds to realities. When he knows that Nancy—the only woman whom Edward, entrapped in the dilemma of his ideal and passion, has truly loved but callously left—has gone insane in Ceylon, the style of his narrative remarkably changes. It is likely that Dowell's psychological

workings here are not told as the content of the story but shown through the change of style.

Until this point, Dowell has carefully been trying to maintain his fidelity of a narrator. The main sources of his story are his own experience, Leonora's talk, and Edward's "outburst," among which the most substantial is Leonora. When he tells information acquired from others, he often clearly asserts that his story is derived from what he has heard from them, on his guard against seemingly definitive truths. He does not neglect to acknowledge the instability of information, attaching the phrases such as "Leonora said" indicating that his story is derived from another's. As a rule, he does not create facts by imagining but leaves unknown what cannot be known: "there are many things that I cannot well make out, about which I cannot well question Leonora, or about which Edward did not tell me" (130).

It is therefore interesting that, although so careful in the former part of the novel, his efforts to keep the narrator's fidelity suddenly disappear in Part IV, when he begins to describe Nancy's both mental and physical acts only too directly. David Trotter regards this change as implying Dowell's madness, pointing out that Dowell "does presume to describe her most intimate thoughts...as well as one of her drunken fantasies about Ashburnham." In Trotter's interpretation, "Dowell may have gone mad. His obsession with Nancy may have led him to invent her thoughts and feelings" (Trotter, 71). As Trotter says, indeed, Dowell describes Nancy's mind from inside. In depicting her, he employs verbs representing psychological acts and states, such as "think," "remember" and so on, without such restraints as he has frequently put on former statements to indicate



that he has reconstructed them from given evidence.

Despite Trotter's interpretation, Dowell's rash descriptions probably imply more than mere insanity. What underlies this peculiar change of style, then? One of the reasons is probably Dowell's love for Nancy. As we have observed, Dowell has deferred the final decision of what is truth and tried to see the world without imposing definitive judgement on it; in other words, he has tried to see it like an infant without any knowledge that biases its view. Like him, Nancy appears as an innocent lacking perception of the world's evil. As John A. Meixner says, Dowell and Nancy are united in that they are "innocents who for the first time have confronted the full evil of the world." Meixner, as well as Trotter, points out that although the events are told by him, "Nancy's seems the sensibility through which they pass" (Meixner, 79).

When we take into consideration Dowell's definition of love, the relation between his love for Nancy and his intimate description of Nancy will become clearer to us. He defines the essence of a man's love for a woman as:

*the craving for identity with the woman that he loves. He desires to see with the same eyes, to touch with the same sense of touch, to hear with the same ears, to lose his identity, to be enveloped, to be supported. (109)*

Since his love has an inclination toward identity with the woman, it is likely that the infant-like Dowell feels extraordinary attachment to the other infant at a loss thrown into the unfamiliar world, and it seems that he tries actualising his love, the ultimate kind of identity with Nancy, in the universe of his narrative, despite the previous

consistency as to how he narrates. This indicates the intensity of his love and accounts for the necessity of this seemingly too intimate description of her mind.

Dowell also compares love to exploration of the world; women's behaviour and movements are like "so many objects on the horizon of the landscape that tempt a man to walk beyond the horizon, to explore" (108). In this sense, his exploration can never end, as Nancy becomes mad after she leaves England. She stops speaking meaningfully and keeps silent except for occasional ejaculations of fragmental words. She will possibly forever remain a mystery, defying further exploration. Nancy thus becomes a symbol of the world itself in that both are certainly alive and animate but ultimately incomprehensible. This likeness probably strengthens Dowell's adherence to Nancy, together with his resolution to seek the truth of the actual world.

It is therefore unclear whether or not Dowell is mad as Trotter implies. It seems possible that, instead of being insane, he temporarily violates his own narrative rule and reconstructs Nancy's physical and psychological acts from the evidence he has collected from Leonora, as Edward, Leonora and Nancy falls into the "hell" of talks before Dowell's arrival at Branshaw Manor to reconcile the tension. The following passage probably functions as preparation for the later change of the narrative:

What had happened was just Hell. Leonora had spoken to Nancy; Nancy had spoken to Edward; Edward had spoken to Leonora — and they had talked and talked. And talked. You have to imagine horrible pictures of gloom and half lights, and emotions

running through silent nights — through whole nights. You have to imagine my beautiful Nancy appearing suddenly to Edward, rising up at the foot of his bed, with her long hair falling, like a split cone of shadow, in the glimmer of a night-light that burned beside him. You have to imagine her, a silent, a no doubt agonized figure, like a spectre, suddenly offering herself to him — to save his reason! And you have to imagine his frantic refusal — and talk. And talk! My God! (182)

Many talks among the three may contain detailed information and their intimate confessions of their souls' depths. It can follow from this that Dowell later does not necessarily work out unknown things by means of an insane kind of imagination.

In addition, what seems more important in the extract above is Dowell's repetition of the word "imagine." Ordering us to imagine things, he himself is attacked by a gush of imagination caused by love, since his description of Nancy is, if based upon facts, still more imaginative than could reasonably be expected. The passionate tone in the passage tells us of his psychological development increasingly influenced by the power of imagination that will lead to his assimilation with Nancy.

In relation with this, let us consider how the chronological order of events is related to the change of narrative. After taking the mad Nancy from Ceylon, suspending the writing for more than a year, Dowell recalls the situation in which he first knows Nancy's insanity: "one day eighteen months ago, I was quietly writing in my room at Branshaw when Leonora came to me with a letter. It was a very pathetic letter from Colonel Rufford about Nancy" (211). What part

of the very novel, then, was he “quietly writing”? After he knows her madness, Dowell stops writing after completing Chapter IV of Part IV, and resumes his work that he left off “a full eighteen months” (210) ago. Before the break, the evidence of his knowledge about Nancy’s present state can be found as early as in the following passage :

And to think that that vivid white thing, that saintly and swanlike being — to think that ... Why, she was like the sail of a ship, so white and so definite in her movements. And to think that she will never ... Why, she will never do anything again. I can’t believe it ... (120)

This is in Chapter II of Part III. Dowell’s passionate identification with Nancy’s mind shortly after this seems, therefore, to be caused partly by the impact of the information. According to his remark, this passage is written about eighteen months before his departure for Ceylon to take Nancy ; and it is also stated, as I have mentioned, that Chapter IV of Part IV is written approximately eighteen months before the travel. The speed of his writing between these points, at which he puts more than 30,000 words during a very short period, probably indicates the intensity of his passion. We can then justifiably imagine that, being acquainted with Nancy’s madness, his love and pity for an abused innocence might accelerate the flow of his emotion, which bursts out as a flood of words.

Dowell’s psychological drama is thus represented in the remarkable change of his narrative style. As Meixner says, “He himself is still in process” (Meixner, 89). In *The Good Soldier*, narrating a story is not a transparent, transcendent act of presenting merely observed things but a practical act that can be influenced by things in the

world about which it is telling.

### III

Taking the case of Nancy into consideration, we shall then look at the structure of the novel in another aspect. It will provide us with a clearer view to compare Dowell's attitudes towards the two female characters he loves, Nancy and Leonora.

As we have seen, Dowell's story owes especially to Leonora. He does not directly experience all the events himself; even when he does, he cannot at the moment penetrate the surface of the affair. When he tries afterwards to reconsider what happened, he draws much upon knowledge from others, especially Leonora. She and Dowell must have had much conversation since Edward's death, intimately sharing much information that sometimes reaches her heart's depths.

In the conversation with Leonora, Dowell no doubt plays the role of listener. He probably does not have anything substantial to tell her but only wants to seek the truth of his own life by collecting information. His indecisiveness about truth and his wariness against hasty judgement must make him a passive character in communication with another. He then always collects facts of her version. Only when he writes afterwards at the desk alone is he in turn devoted to reflection on what life is really like. Dowell therefore appears to have no definite character; as Michael Levenson says, "Dowell is nothing" (Levenson 1991, 116) in a sense. This makes him tend to sympathise, or assimilate himself with others. We have observed how he identifies with Nancy; in addition, he becomes

another Edward in the last part of the novel, living in Branshaw Manor with Nancy.

It is noteworthy that Dowell also disguises himself as Leonora. He humbly tries to set himself in the position of Leonora, assimilating the circumstances of his storytelling to those of Leonora's by applying the same expression to both: in his imaginary situation of narrating, the silent listener and Dowell sitting opposite each other in a country house, "overhead the great black flood of wind polishes the bright stars" (19) ; he then describes the surroundings of him and Leonora, where the "immense wind, coming from across the forest, roared overhead" (100). (Note that the former is a place merely imagined by him, while the latter real.) It is therefore likely that he, in setting the imaginary circumstances of his narrating, attempts to imitate Leonora's role of a storyteller, the high wind overhead.

Why does he want to be like Leonora? One of the reasons might be, just as in the case of Nancy, that he loves Leonora. He occasionally admits that he has a kind of love for her: "I loved Leonora always and, today, I would very cheerfully lay down my life, what is left of it, in her service" (36). His inclination to identify with others he loves seems to be at work here; or he wants to explore the new world, that of Leonora, by being her.

Considering Leonora's character, we can see a more important reason of Dowell's disguise. She is a Roman Catholic, and Catholicism is the most significant determiner of her life. Unlike Edward or Nancy, Leonora, "the coldest and the strongest of the three" (209), does not surrender to the English dilemma of passion and convention. She succeeds in oppressing her passion, seeing life just "as a perpetual sex-battle between husbands who desire to be unfaithful to their

wives, and wives who desire to recapture their husbands in the end” (169), and survives the battle eventually as a wife of Rodney Bayham, “a pleasant enough sort of sheep” (213). She is not as insensitive as Dowell while facing the events, but she lacks the attitude of perceiving her own passion. Her version of reality then becomes a rigid one, while it lacks the recognition of layered complications of the universe. Her ideas are steady, though the kind of “interpretation that is strong, such as Leonora’s reading of Edward, may be merely tyrannical and not necessarily correct” (Armstrong, 211). It seems that Dowell, a seeker of truth, is once attracted by Leonora, the transcendental narrator who has experienced and survived the tumultuous events to the end. Dowell probably wants to tell an ultimately definitive version of the story, if possible. That is why he envies Leonora.

He has come to recognize that there is no such thing, however. He instead chooses to keep “rambling” and imitates Leonora only externally—only in terms of the narrator’s position and attitude. When his story is derived from Leonora’s information, therefore, he avoids seeing things through her eyes, not failing to assert that it is originally told by her. The communication with Leonora cannot influence Dowell’s passion very much, as his way of narrative does not significantly change; he does not have such strong love for Leonora as gets him inside her mind. As the phrases indicating his information sources appear repetitively, we realize the actual Dowell collecting information from Leonora and writing away at his desk, tranquilly reflecting on the past affairs.

Compared with his assimilation with Leonora, the significance of Dowell’s love for Nancy becomes clearer. Led by love for Nancy,

Dowell exercises his power of imagination to the most and tries to accomplish identity with her. As I have argued, Dowell has the tendency to assimilate himself with others. That with Nancy is indeed one of those assimilations, but it is qualitatively different from the others in that it is an attempt of identification inside the object's mind.

As for Dowell's psychology expressed through the way he narrates, it would be interesting to consider again the speed of his writing. He is writing Chapter I of Part III when he says that he and Leonora had conversation "a month ago, about a week after the funeral of poor Edward" (99), just after which he starts writing. As we have already seen, it follows from this that he has written about 30,000 words for a month. In contrast, he spends as much as five months writing 38,000 words at most from Part III to Chapter III of Part IV, since he says in Chapter I of Part IV: "I have been writing away at this story now for six months and reflecting longer and longer upon these affairs" (168). If my above supposition is right that after he knows Nancy's insanity he writes 30,000 words within a short period, the comparative sluggishness of his writing until that juncture appears all the more remarkable. This seems to mean, as Dowell himself suggests, that the "longer" he reflects on the meaning of what has happened, the slower his narrative becomes — and then the information of Nancy's insanity, together with his deepened recognition about the Ashburnham affairs, dramatically accelerates his writing.

The final twist imposed on the narrative is the eighteen-month break between Chapter IV and V of Part IV. This makes us aware that the narrative itself is also an act involved in the dynamism of the



world around the narrator. Dowell does not transcend the flow of time, unable to assume a thoroughly objective view of the world, since narrators of his kind cannot help uncovering “their own subjective involvement in the problematic tale they unfold” (Kahane, 130). Dowell starts writing just after Edward’s death and Nancy’s departure, probably thinking at the beginning that he is going to write of what has already happened and finished influencing his being. He must, though, soon be aware that he cannot remain safe away from the experience and his acquiring a bitter kind of maturity is inevitable.

In contrast to the extraordinary insensitivity to the events when he experiences them in person, Dowell tries to re-live substantially in the course of writing. In this process, he restores the lost feelings and transforms himself into a figure responding emotionally to the outer world. He escapes from the “catalepsy” he has fallen into and perceives the dynamism of the world in the correspondingly wandering narrative.

## Conclusion

What is a novel for Dowell and Ford? In *The Good Soldier*, Dowell sometimes mentions what he supposes to be a novel. According to him, Edward likes a sentimental type of “novels in which typewriter girls married Marquises and governesses Earls” (32). Edward in his “final outburst” speaks like “a cheap novelist. — Or like a very good novelist for the matter of that, if it’s the business of a novelist to make you see things clearly” (104). In contrast, Leonora has read “few novels” so she is not familiar with romantic ideas of

“novels” such as “a pure and constant love succeeding the sound of wedding bells” (169). In these remarks, Dowell regards a novel as grasping the world with a rigidly fixed way and imposing a definite view upon the world. It is obvious that he (or Ford) thinks his writing is, if categorized as a novel, something different from those novels in terms of perception of the world.

Near the end of *The Good Soldier*, Dowell also sarcastically compares the end of the Ashburnham affairs to (probably) Victorian novels’ typical endings :

And, when I come to look at it I see that it is a happy ending with wedding bells and all. The villains — for obviously Edward and the girl were villains — have been punished by suicide and madness. The heroine — the perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly deceitful heroine [Leonora] — has become the happy wife of a perfectly normal, virtuous and slightly deceitful husband. (225 – 26)

Dowell here plays with multiple points of view on the reality, defying semiotic reduction of its complications to a simple construction. His writing could be thought of as a criticism of such a kind of novel.

In this sense, *The Good Soldier* is one of the modernist “metanovels that make explicit the implicit dynamics of creating a fictional world” (Armstrong, 16). In the case of this novel, there is not a single “fictional world” but multiple ones of Leonora’s, Edward’s, and so on that exist along with one another, and Dowell’s deviate way of narrative is a reflection of his attempt to grasp the entire dynamism of them which could not be expressed with a traditional way of romance.

Although at first Dowell may have been resolved to acquire a rigid, final version of reality, in the long run he is not able to get a single authentic view on the world. He, however, gets a new recognition of the dynamic world of human beings in the course of writing, transcending the former ignorant, blind Dowell. Ford's attempt to represent this recognition necessarily leads to the mystifying but fruitful method of narrative, which invites us to participate in Dowell's reconstitution of the world.

The dramatisation of Dowell's psychology which is presented through how, not what, he narrates must be one of Ford's aims, as we have seen in Chapter II and III of this paper — the "real events of the novel are Dowell's thoughts about what has happened, and not the happenings themselves" (Hynes, 101). On the one hand, as we have seen, Leonora's revelation makes Dowell so conscious of his deficiency of grasping the reality that he obstinately adheres to his original strategy of leaving the truth undetermined. On the other hand, his drastic relinquishing of that style when he speaks about Nancy becomes all the more impressive as it indicates the intensity of his emotion. One of the essentials of Ford's art is that the style of storytelling itself, not the content of the story, can be thus moving. In this sense as well as others, the novel's subtitle, "A Tale of Passion," seems completely suitable.

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